

First record of Verreaux's Eagle *Aquila verreauxii* nesting on the ground

Mark D. Anderson and Nico Laubscher

L'Aigle de Verreaux *Aquila verreauxii* niche normalement sur des plateformes rocheuses ou, occasionnellement, dans des arbres ou sur des structures artificielles. Les auteurs rapportent la première observation de nidification à terre, dans un bois d'*Eucalyptus* sur le terrain d'une exploitation agricole près de Fraserburg, Northern Cape Province, Afrique du Sud. Après qu'un coup de vent eut jeté le nid à terre, les aigles ont continué à nicher au sol pendant cinq années consécutives. Les trois premiers oisillons sont tombés victimes de mammifères carnivores, mais après que le fermier eut construit une clôture contre les prédateurs, deux oisillons ont été élevés.

Verreaux's Eagle *Aquila verreauxii* typically constructs a large stick nest on a cliff ledge or a sheer boulder outcrop⁶, occasionally in a tree^{3,4} and sometimes on an artificial structure, such as a microwave tower or electricity pylon^{1,2,5}. Here we provide the first published record of the species nesting on the ground.

For several years a pair of Verreaux's Eagles has nested on 'Kruis van Bloemfontein' farm (31°44'S 21°52'E), east of Fraserburg, Northern Cape Province, South Africa. In 1992, the pair nested in a *Eucalyptus* grove c300 m from the homestead. That year and in the three subsequent years strong winds blew the nest down.

However, in 1996, the pair built a large, flat nest on the ground between two *Eucalyptus* trees (Fig 1). Over the following five years, the birds used this ground nest, each year maintaining and adding to the structure. Animal tracks to the nest indicated that during the first two years (1996–97) the young were predated by a Cape Clawless Otter *Aonyx capensis* and during 1998 by an African Wild Cat *Felis lybica*. On 18 August 1999, the landowner, Gerrit Visser, constructed a small, 1 m-high, predator-proof fence (c10 x 14 m) around the nest and in that year and the next the chick successfully fledged. In 1999, it fledged on 15 October.

During the breeding period, though disturbance was kept to a minimum, it was possible to photograph the nest at close quarters. Rock Hyrax *Procavia capensis* remains were visible in the nest. Only still-born lambs were fed to the chicks. Post-breeding, the nest area was cleared of prey remains by Gerrit Visser. During 2001 the pair built a new nest in a different *Eucalyptus* (c200 m from the ground nest). This nest, perhaps sturdier, was not blown down. A chick fledged that year (G Visser

pers comm) and in 2002 an immature was observed during September near the nest (NL pers obs).

Acknowledgements

Gerrit Visser has gone to great lengths to conserve his breeding Verreaux's Eagles. We thank him for some of the information presented here and we also commend him for his efforts to conserve these eagles and his property's other wildlife. ♀

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Dept. of Agriculture, Land Reform, Environment & Conservation, Private Bag X5018, Kimberley 8300, Northern Cape, South Africa. E-mail: manderson@grand.ncape.gov.za.



Figure 1. Remains of the Verreaux's Eagle *Aquila verreauxii* nest on the ground between two *Eucalyptus* trees, 'Kruis van Bloemfontein' farm, Fraserburg, Northern Cape Province, South Africa (Nico Laubscher)



Figure 2. The small, predator-proof fence that was constructed around the eagle nest (Gerrit Visser)



Figure 3. Verreaux's Eagle *Aquila verreauxii* nestling (Gerrit Visser)

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